

Should forgiveness be conditional philosophy essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The concept of forgiveness has been a central concern to individuals and communities throughout history. Present in theological ideas, the concept of forgiveness is widespread and has greatly influenced our moral attitudes towards one another and how we react when we have been offended. The standard definition in the Oxford English Dictionary for forgiveness states 'may be forgiven, pardonable, excusable' (Hughes, 2010). However, by merely pardoning or excusing the offender, without them taking accountability for their action, can dismiss the moral significance and psychological emotions of the victim.

I shall argue, with reference to Charles Griswold's book *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*, that the process of forgiveness is restorative. Forgiving has the ability to reunite a relationship disrupted by someone's wrongdoing as well as aid in letting go of one's negative feelings and hostility towards the offender. I will explore Bishop Butler's understanding of forgiveness, which is incompatible with my view of forgiveness. Thus I shall argue that forgiveness is only possible when conditional on repentance. I shall propose Professor Griswold's conditions which need to be fulfilled in order for forgiveness to be completely satisfied, whilst providing a counterexample in support of those who forgive unconditionally. Ultimately, I will conclude in support of conditional forgiveness as I would have demonstrated how unconditional forgiveness can understate the moral significance of the victim as well as the moral importance of the action.

Bishop Joseph Butler understands forgiveness as the 'forfeiture of resentment' (Murphy, 1988, p. 1). He treats resentment as indignation due to a moral wrong to oneself. According to Butler, forgiveness is compatible

<https://assignbuster.com/should-forgiveness-be-conditional-philosophy-essay/>

with some degree of continuous rage towards the wrongdoer for their action. Therefore, forswearing resentment does not require giving up every negative feeling associated with the injurious event (Griswold, 2007, p. 41) He argues instead, moderated resentment is necessary as it helps us to recognize the level of injury caused to us whilst also serving as a suitable response towards the wrongdoer for their action. For Butler, resentment is not inconsistent with goodwill and we may therefore love our enemy (Griswold, 2007, p. 36) despite their actions towards us. Thus it seems Bishop Butler does not require the offender to meet conditions to gain the victims forgiveness, Because we are in need of forgiveness, consistency demands that we be forgiving of others. (Griswold, 2007, p. 36).

However, claiming to have forgiven your wrongdoer whilst holding a proportionate amount of resentment towards them seems counter-intuitive. I feel that in order to fully forgive someone, resentment has to be overcome in order to rid any hostility, moral hatred, and negative feelings towards the offender. Forgiveness benefits the wrongdoers as well as the victim, helping them to alleviate guilt and blame, thereby helping them to move forward in their lives and not reoffend. If resentment is consistent with goodwill, as Butler argues it is, the process is compromised and forgiveness for neither persons cannot be achieved. Instead, the injurer should make a conscious effort to ensure forgiveness is fulfilled, which requires attempting to abolish any resentment the victim bears towards them. If not, the victim has to accept they have been wronged and begin to deal with the pain of their injury, psychologically and physically, without the satisfaction of knowing their offender has repented for their action. Bishop Butler thus understates

the importance of forgiveness as a process the victim must go through to overcome their resentment and psychological hostility. Forgiveness should require modifying and changing ones moral judgements about the offender, through a process which makes them deserving of the victim's compassion. Without this process the emotional complexity of forgiveness is lost.

Unlike Butler, Charles Griswold argues that forgiveness aims to relinquish resentment whilst ensuring the offender is held accountable. He believes that although forgiveness is generally good and admirable there are circumstances which prohibit giving forgiveness to the offender, especially when the offender is unrepentant of their sins. For Griswold, forgiveness is not meant as a therapeutic program (Griswold, 2007, p. 54) instead the conditions he outlines are conditions of a moral nature (Griswold, 2007, p. 54) meant to alter ones moral judgments of a person, and help to improve the victims view of the wrongdoer. Once these conditions have been met the offender is entitled to forgiveness from the victim (Griswold, 2007, p. 47) On this view, forgiveness cannot be seen as a gift to the offender (Griswold, 2007, p. 67) which is given freely without having met certain criteria which repudiates ones wrong doing. Forgiveness is therefore conditional on repentance otherwise it would collapse into forgetting, or excusing, or rationalisation. (Griswold, 2007, p. 46).

Professor Griswold believes forgiveness requires reciprocity between injurer and injured (Griswold, 2007, p. xvi) which can be achieved through satisfying the six conditions he outlines.

½Firstly, it is important that the wrongdoer takes responsibility for their action,

Secondly, ensure they repudiate the deed,

Third, regret their action,

Fourth, commit to being a better person,

Fifth, show understanding from the injured person's perspective,

and lastly, offer a narrative of why they are worthy of the victims forgiveness by showing they are committed to changing their ways , as well as committing to fully letting go of resentment. (Griswold, 2007, pp. 48 – 52)

These conditions, when fulfilled, will reunite mutual respect and acknowledgment between the wrongdoer and aid in the return to the minimal state of civility before the injury was done (Griswold, 2007, p. 49).

However, Griswold argues forgiveness is only possible if the offender has become morally changed through meeting these conditions (Griswold, 2007, p. 49). Conditional forgiveness is necessary as forgiving the offender without requiring anything from them conveys to them, and the rest of the public, they are not responsible for their action. If the offender is unrepentant of their sins, they have not been morally changed, and for that reason we would not know if the offender would recommit their wrongdoing in the future. Unconditional forgiveness denies all requirements for the offender to take responsibility for their action or try to repudiate their wrongdoing.

Therefore I feel it downplays the moral significance of the event as it fails to
<https://assignbuster.com/should-forgiveness-be-conditional-philosophy-essay/>

endorse the extent of the offender's moral wrongdoings. It also allows the offender to dismiss the harm to the victim which denies them respect for the wrongdoing against them. If the offender takes responsibility for their action and commits to becoming a better person, then they become worthy of the victim's forgiveness.

In agreement with Griswold, I feel forgiveness should only be given once the offender repents for their sins. Without doing so, it adds insult to the injury so far as the victim is concerned (Griswold, 2007, p. 49). In fulfilling the conditions of forgiveness, the offender comes to understand and accept what morality requires of him. If he does not, the wrongdoer may never understand the moral significance of the act, pretending the injustice upon the victim does not carry any importance.

The conditions Professor Griswold outlines aim to show that forgiveness should not be freely given as a gift. The conditions are important because a wrong should not be disregarded, and if forgiveness is unconditional, the offender carries no moral weight for their action. Overcoming resentment and being able to forgive the offender may end psychological discomfort the victim longed for, only achievable through the repentance of the offender. Katie Hutchinson from Victoria Island Canada finally found peace after her husband's killer confessed to the murder 4 years later and apologised to her. Only then was she able to forgive him and begin her healing process which finally allowed her to let go of the moral hatred which grew inside her. Similarly, it allowed her husband's killer to understand the extent of his crime as he had the opportunity to directly relate to his victim's hurt and anger. Forgiveness was conditional on his apology and confession which due <https://assignbuster.com/should-forgiveness-be-conditional-philosophy-essay/>

to this, both parties psychologically benefitted. Forgiveness said nothing less about her feelings towards her husband, or how profound his murder was, it became an opportunity to create a new and hopeful beginning (Hutchinson, 2011). The murderer was not let off the moral hook and the moral significance of the action remained a crucial feature in their lives. As the offender did not demand forgiveness or had been given it freely as a gift, the victims self-respect was maintained, which like Griswold, I feel is lost in unconditional forgiveness.

On this account of forgiveness, the moral significance of the action was not downplayed, and the self respect of the victim was maintained. The offender takes responsibility for their actions but also begins to amend the harm caused. Giving up resentment through a process in which the perpetrator satisfy's conditions seems a necessary requirement in achieving forgiveness as an end, especially if the offender is alive and willing to repent. Thus conditional forgiveness avoids the main objections which apply to unconditional forgiveness. But, what happens with the offender is deceased or unrepentant? Should forgiveness still be conditional?

Professor Griswold argues that if the forgiveness is unconditional, the intrinsically interpersonal character of forgiveness is lost (Griswold, 2007, p. 64). I accept this assertion on the grounds that as there is no face to face interaction in the process, the victim may not gain full satisfaction from forgiving unconditionally. Yet Griswold allows forgiveness to be granted to the deceased without having carried out his six conditions. Forgiveness is possible if you are able to plausibly construct a scenario of what that person would do if you were to meet in the circumstances where they were

<https://assignbuster.com/should-forgiveness-be-conditional-philosophy-essay/>

repentant for their wrongdoing. Constructing a narrative on the reasons for forgiving the offender and why they deserve forgiveness may involve gathering data (Griswold, 2007, p. 120) of why that person acted as they had done or indicate issues in the offenders past which caused or influenced them to commit this offence. Once understood, the victim can come to feel respected and let go of any resentment they may have towards the offender (Griswold, 2007, p. 121). Once the victim sees the forgiver in a new light, forgiveness can truly be fulfilled. Forgiveness, in this case, may be lacking or imperfect relative to the paradigm (Griswold, 2007, p. xvi) however, this does not rule out the central role forgiveness plays in letting go the negative feelings and resentment one may hold against the offender.

On the contrary, there are several non-paradigmatic cases in which unconditional forgiveness is essential in the natural process of psychological recovery. A counter-example to Griswold's conditional forgiveness can be demonstrated through the unconditional forgiveness given by the Pennsylvanian community. On May 16th 2007, 32 students were shot dead by a former student whilst many others were severely wounded on the campus of Virginia Tech University, USA. Before committing suicide, the former Virginia tech student had sent a manifesto to NBC news which stated that he believed his injurious and merciless act was benefitting the community in some way. Shortly after the shooting ended, the hurt was felt universally. A candle lighting memorial ceremony was conducted and thousands of people flocked together in support of those who were killed. Shockingly, amongst the tears and sorrow, banners were held by parents and students stating 'we forgive you'.

Surely this forgiveness would deny the self respect and moral dignity of the victims? I argue against Griswold, demonstrating that there are circumstances which unconditional forgiveness does not collapse into condemnation. Although not always desirable, it is possible to forgive someone whilst continuing to pronounce indignation towards the offender, especially if this gives them psychological tranquillity through doing so. The Pennsylvanian community should not be regarded as weak or mentally deficient for forgiving the killer, instead they should be appraised and admired for their love and ability to forgive in such difficult circumstances. Although Griswold suggests $\frac{1}{2}$ to forgive someone undeserving of the honour, under the banner of a $\frac{1}{2}$ gift, $\frac{1}{2}$ may condone the wrong-doer, and even provide encouragement to more offenses $\frac{1}{2}$ (Griswold, 2007, p. 63) he fails to consider those who do not condone their actions and will continue to voice their anger towards such crimes against humanity. Forgiving unconditionally may be a difficult thing to do, but letting go of psychological hatred whilst fighting for justice is possible. Unconditional forgiveness $\frac{1}{2}$ is compatible with outright condemnation of the wrongdoing and a determination to fight against it, and thus with maintaining self-respect $\frac{1}{2}$ (Gerrard and McNaughton, 2003, p. 6) If the wrongdoing is not overlooked, and the full extent of the crime is widely understood and not downplayed, I feel no reason to contest against the satisfaction the injured party gains through forgiving unconditionally. It is a personal option, experienced by only the person giving it. Thus Griswold's $\frac{1}{2}$ s argument is unsound. He cannot dictate to those who forgive unconditionally their forgiveness is flawed, as he does not know or understand their reasoning for forgiving. Whether someone $\frac{1}{2}$ deserves $\frac{1}{2}$ forgiveness is completely subjective and questionable. He

<https://assignbuster.com/should-forgiveness-be-conditional-philosophy-essay/>

makes a generalisation which is not necessarily true. If forgiving unconditionally allows the victim to overcome resentment and their negative emotions, then so be it.

Forgiving the offender can sometimes only be possible if the forgiveness is given without requirements. In the previous example the killer thought he was doing good, so carrying out Griswold's six conditions in which a scenario with the killer is imagined, would in this case, lead to further anger, resentment and moral hatred, instead of abolishing these negative emotions. Unconditional forgiveness is needed for the same reasons Professor Griswold gives for reciprocal forgiveness. Without unconditional forgiveness how would we re-establish trust in man-kind, ensuring we do not lose hope or happiness for the future after such tragic losses? There are positive reasons for forgiving even the unrepentant. Vengefulness and moral hatred are minimised whilst a sense of human solidarity increases.

Gerrard and McNaughton strongly endorse this view of unconditional forgiveness, arguing that as we are members of the same species, in a shared human community, like a shared membership of a family, provides reason alone for forgiveness (Gerrard and McNaughton, 2003, p. 10). They defend their view by arguing that if we are to produce a sense of commonality, we have to realise that sometimes circumstances are difficult, and if circumstances would have been less favourable...I might have become the kind of person who acted in this way (Gerrard and McNaughton, 2003, p. 11) Monstrous as the perpetrators may be, they still share the same characteristics as us. The human condition is sometimes fragile, easily manipulated, or clouded by false information and judgments
<https://assignbuster.com/should-forgiveness-be-conditional-philosophy-essay/>

leading us to act in terrible ways. But in some cases it is possible to see how the offender came to be or act in that way. Griswold does, to some extent, endorse this view in his conditional forgiveness for the deceased. He suggests by constructing a narrative about the offender, it is possible to find an indication why they have committed the offence (Griswold, 2007, p. 121). In the example of the University shootings, it was soon discovered that the student had several mental disorders which triggered him to act irrationally and violently. Although his actions should not be condoned, based on the presence of a mental disorder, it does somehow allow us to understand the killer, and alleviate some of the anger and resentment we have towards him. If we somehow put ourselves in his shoes, perhaps we can relate to his sorrow, misery and anger towards the world. We all have the capacity to morally wrong someone, and if circumstances were different we too would be in need of forgiveness. (Gerrard and McNaughton, 2003, 11)

I do not deny the fact the killer was deceased played an important part in the community's ability to forgive unconditionally. Had the killer been alive, I doubt they would have given their forgiveness so readily without his repentance. Nonetheless, unconditional forgiveness has allowed them to relieve hostile feelings, reconcile their trust in man-kind, maintain self-respect and ensure the moral significance of the action was maintained. If we take forgiveness to be a process which the injured party must go through in order to overcome negative emotions, then unconditional forgiveness has the ability to do so. To recall Griswold's argument, condoning the crimes of the unrepentant would demonstrate to others they are not accountable for their actions. By forswearing revenge and committing to let go of

resentment, the Pennsylvanian community hardly demonstrated to others that by committing such crimes you will not be held responsible. They do not condone his actions and never will. If the killer were alive they would have demanded justice. Letting go of your anger does not let the offender off the moral hook. Thus, I have shown unconditional forgiveness does not necessarily collapse into condemnation.

I shall note that Griswold's approach to the topic is secular. Although he focuses on secular forgiveness he does not deny the widespread role of forgiveness in Christian and Judaic narrative. For people who are religious, the process of forgiveness can be easier and less complicated as their religion requires they be forgiving no matter what. Religious forgiveness about believes, having faith in God, yourself and man-kind. It is difficult to interpret whether God's forgiveness is conditional or unconditional as this view differs amongst spectators. I do however argue that whether forgiveness is conditional or unconditional, forgiveness is always good and admirable. The benefits one gains from forgiving are more important than the process one goes through in order to get to the desired end.

Whether or not forgiveness should be conditional ultimately lies with the decision of the injured person. Both conditional forgiveness and unconditional forgiveness have benefits which help re-establish a relationship harmed by someone's wrongdoing. However, I do support Professor Griswold's argument that when the offender is alive, and unrepentant, he is not worthy of your forgiveness. But, this does not mean that forgiveness should not be granted, if in doing so, allows you to let go of the psychological hatred which consumes you. Unconditional forgiveness
<https://assignbuster.com/should-forgiveness-be-conditional-philosophy-essay/>

certainly has the same benefits of reciprocal conditional forgiveness. It does however seem a common type of forgiveness given more readily when the perpetrator is deceased. Enmity and abomination are far worse than human solidarity and peacefulness. Generally speaking, if the offender is alive, forgiveness should be conditional on the offenders repentance otherwise it is possible the moral significance of the victim and moral importance of the event is understated. If however, the perpetrator is deceased Professor Griswold's argument no longer suffices. Everyone has their own reasons to forgive but if forgiveness is to be truly fulfilled and satisfied, the offender should, at the very minimum, take responsibility for their actions and try to repudiate their wrongdoing.